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Meet the king of barbecue

CHEF DU JOUR/Midge Knerr

Chef Howard Snitzer is a man of passion. The executive chef of both Forty-1° North's Grill and Christie's, he is exercising his enthusiasm at Christie's during the winter months - and it is all about barbecue. Snitzer smokes his own ribs, chicken, brisket and duck on premises; sides of drunken beans and Jicama slaw accompany the four dipping sauces - traditional, smoked vidalia onion, mango habanero and Thai BBQ.

Snitzer's restaurant adventures began at the age of 17, when he went to Aspen, Colo., to be a ski bum. He planned to earn a living by washing dishes in "a barbecue joint," he recalls with a smile. A self-proclaimed "bad boy," he says frankly, "I was a terrible dishwasher."

It was a snowy night when he and the restaurant owner's son took the owner's Jaguar for a spin and hit a turn that slid the car down a ravine. Luckily, he and the driver walked away from the scene. The owner told him the next day that he had planned to fire Snitzer that night, but in light of the accident, he gave him a second chance - along with a \$1-an-hour raise and a promotion to lunch cook.

A culinary awakening of sorts, the experience laid the foundation for Snitzer's love of barbecue. As he became more serious about the profession, he went to the Culinary Institute of America and has worked in many venues, large and small. Such varied experiences made him a perfect fit for the job leading two very different Newport restaurants.

After answering an ad in the newspaper, Snitzer interviewed for the job, bringing with him a jar of "Howie's Sweet Hots" (killer pickles with a kick). Snitzer claims his coveted recipe sealed the deal. He was chosen to be the chef right then and there - maybe not realizing quite what he was getting himself into - and has been enjoying the ride ever since.

"I love the grill kitchen at Forty-1° North - prepping at 9 a.m. (after overseeing Christie's kitchen two hours earlier) ... the harbor view from the outdoor kitchen made it enjoyable to come to work." And, he added, "that kitchen rocked this summer." He said he is proud to have been part of the conceptual menu process.



Howard Snitzer is the executive chef at both Forty-1° North Grill and Christie's, both in Newport. (Jacqueline Marque/Daily News staff)

After speaking with the jovial storyteller, I had a chance to taste the smoked "fruits" of Snitzer's labor, all rubbed with his secret spices consisting of 25 ingredients. The plates were presented in procession - a bit overwhelming! - as I tried a little of everything. The sauces kicked the flavors up a notch; the duck was my favorite. And the jalapeno corn muffin was delicious. (And even though this column focuses on his barbecue, Snitzer's food from the Forty-1° North Grill this summer was an epicurean delight.)

Manager Matt Carletti told me Christie's cranks up the Delta and Mississippi blues on Thursday nights as the restaurant has a smoky twang in the air. Snitzer said he hopes the barbecue will endear the restaurant to the locals, since "there's no barbecue like it in town." It certainly sticks to your ribs on a chilly night.

Midge Knerr, a former executive chef in Newport and New York, is a Daily News columnist. Send her e-mail at midgelknerr@aol.com.

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